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ABSTRACT

Noting that language should be a vital area of concern for anyone interested in speech communication, this paper focuses on the concern for language in the classroom as it is discussed in speech communication literature. Selected studies from the more extensive literature on educational practices are also cited. Programs in which language is studied as a part of communication courses are mentioned and the concern for acceptable language and studies of semantics and oral language in these courses is noted. The literature reviewed shows concern about language in the classroom in two primary areas: (1) helping children acquire language skills, and (2) helping older students develop skilled use of language. The problems of nonstandard speech, dialects, and teacher attitudes toward such language usage are considered. (MKM)

Language in the Classroom

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Language in the Classroom

Introduction

In the report of the Memphis Conference of Teacher Educators (Newcombe and Allen, 1974), one of the conference participants, Dorothy Higginbotham, noted that "speech and language have been and to a considerable extent continue to be studied as distinct disciplines" (p. 12). In the past, researchers in the field of linguistics have concentrated on language with little regard for its use in actual communication situations, while researchers in the field of speech communication have studied the communication process with little attention to language. Higginbotham maintains that "the inevitable consequence of this decision is that the interdependence of speech and language has been obscured with the result that in theory building, research, and teaching, the full implications of each for the other has only recently begun to be explored" (p. 12).

Language is a part of every speaking situation and, therefore, should be a vital area of concern and study for anyone interested in speech communication. Language should also be a vital area of concern of the speech communication teacher.

This paper will focus upon the concern for language in the classroom as discussed in the literature of speech communication. Selected studies from the more extensive literature on educational practices will be cited where appropriate.

Language as a Part of the Communication Curriculum

Apparently, teachers of speech communication are concerned with language. In a 1969 survey, Gibson et al. (1970) discovered that 23 percent of junior college, 28 percent of college, and 39 percent of university courses in speech included a unit on "language." A substantial number of these courses also included a unit on "semantics." Surprisingly, while these courses included units on language and semantics, only eight percent of those surveyed indicated that one of their course objectives was to "develop better command and use of language."

In a series of criteria for secondary school courses in speech, Cortwright et al. (1968) noted that: "High levels of English practice, including appropriate grammar, pronunciation, language and speech style are required" (p. 220). As an instructional procedure, they maintain that "use of acceptable language is stressed" (p. 220). To them, "language" includes vocabulary, pronunciation, meaning, usage, and style.

This emphasis on the use of acceptable language is reflected in a survey of 328 members of the Speech Communication Association Undergraduate Speech Instruction Interest Group conducted by Gruner (1968). Almost 85 percent of the respondents agreed that a requirement for a public speech which received a grade of "C" was that "the speaker did not detract from his message through gross errors of grammar, pronunication, or articulation."

More recently, Lynn (1977) noted that one of the things a course in classroom communication should focus on is increasing a teacher's understanding of oral language development in children. She surveyed 92 instructors and found, however, that this was one of the units <u>least</u> stressed in their courses.

"Language" is mentioned in a number of lists of speech communication competencies. In the "cognitive core" of competencies for the basic college course, Levinson (1976) includes: "Explain some of the aspects of language that illustrate how critical (denotative) and personal (connotative) meanings affect accuracy in communication" (p. 227). Bassett et al. (1978) include the ability to "use words, pronunciation, and grammar appropriate for the situation" as a minimal speaking competency for high school graduates (p. 298).

In 1979, the International Communication Association Instructional Communication Competencies Committee proposed a list of communication competencies for teachers (Hurt et al., 1979). The report recommended that, among other things, a teacher or prospective teacher should be able to: 1) Distinguish between effective language usage and "proper" or grammatical usage; 2) Explain the stages of oral language development; 3) Distinguish between competence and performance in communication development; 4) Distinguish among "accent," "dialect," and "speech disorder"; and 5) Develop a positive attitude toward children whose oral language is different from that of the teacher. These competencies show a concern for an awareness of language variables in the communication classroom.

Language Acquisition and Language Skill

Concern about language in the classroom can be divided into two areas: 1) helping children acquire language skills; and 2) helping older students develop a skilled use of language.

The first area is the primary concern of teachers of language arts. To many of these teachers, improving classroom communication means "Give children a chance to talk" (Herald, 1969) by creating a classroom environment where children will feel free to talk (Strickland, 1971). Broman (1969) notes that children listen during 50 to 75 percent of the school day. Holt (1967) maintains that "when a child gets little or no chance to talk, he does not get any better at talking" (p. 4). Many of the writers in this area advise teachers to encourage their students to use language creatively (cf. Keleher, 1967; Beyer, 1971; Hunter, 1968) while setting a good example through their own speech (cf. Broman, 1969). Thus, the teacher is seen as an example of correct usage which the students are expected to emulate.

Several of these writers warn teachers not to critize their students' use of language. Burnes (1968) notes that "as soon as we begin to hamper the child's desire to express himself by criticism of that expression, we begin to destroy his ability to communicate at all" (p. 40). Hunter (1968) stresses that methods such as "rejecting comments, boring vocabulary assignments, copying papers over, looking up misspelled words, being told that someone else's work is much better than one's own" (p. 373) discourage writing and speaking.

Hart and Risley (1978) advocate an "incidental teaching process" in which the teacher models an elaborated response he/she wants to hear from a student, prompts the student until the response is given, and then confirms the response. The authors note that this method results in an increase in the number of sentences and words used by preschoolers and in an increace in vocabulary.

Goodman (1969) reacts to this "elitist notion" of the teacher as language model. He maintains that:

> Armed with righteousness, /teachers/ have sought to make their pupils over in their own linguistic image. They have exhorted their pupils to learn the language of the teacher while disdaining to listen carefully themselves to the language of the learners. (p. 125)

To avoid this possibility, Hopper (1971) calls for an expansion of the linguistic idea of competence to include function of language. He maintains that "much of grammar has already been learned by the child long before he enters school, and that development just prior to entering kindergarten at least is focusing upon learning to apply linguistic knowledge appropriately to situations" (p. 34). He believes that "educational practices could be more supportive of this aspect of development if less emphasis were placed upon forcing children to speak sentences in certain grammatical forms . . . and more emphasis were placed upon educating children to use their language to perform certain functions" (p. 34). Hopper and Wrather (1978) outline a plan for improving instruction in the functional aspects of children's communication development.

Based upon the writings of Basil Bernstein, Wood (1968) suggests an "indirect" method of language teaching for elementary school students. She believes teachers can teach linguistic forms (such as "possessive") through games and exercises without labeling them as linguistic forms. In addition, she suggests four areas in which oral language programs in elementary schools can be improved:

1) We must review all pertinent research and theory in language development and behavior for children;

2) We must plan our language objectives so that they are specific and so that they complement the developmental stages of grammatical acquisition;

3) Our published texts (methods texts, readers, curriculum guides) must reflect these linguistic objectives in the language improvement exercises; and

4) Our classroom activities in speech and language improvement must reflect the language code objectives. (p. 192)

Language arts specialists generally are concerned with helping children acquire language skills. A complete review of the process of language acquisition, however, is beyond the scope of this paper (see Cazden, 1969, for a brief summary of the process of early language acquisition; see Wood, 1975, for an extensive review of the literature on verbal communication development; in addition, see Ecroyd, 1973).

Wallace (1968) believes that the teacher of speech and language should appear "at the point at which communication and expression can be recognized as distinct kinds of experiences by the child" (p. 96). He cites a study which concludes that fourth graders can recognize the difference between general and specific words and statements and can construct passages that develop from a general idea to a specific one. Thus, these students are developing a skilled use of language.

The remainder of this review will focus on articles which deal with helping older students develop a skilled use of language. One of the areas which has received much attention in the communication literature is so-called "nonstandard" speech.

"Nonstandard" Speech

Several speech communication authors have proposed language programs for students who do not speak standard English. Holt (1970) describes an "Ethno-Linguistic Approach" developed in cooperation with black inner city parents, teachers, and children in Chicago. The course is designed to incorporate Black Culture as a basis for speech-language learning.

For older students, Lee (1971) describes a non-credit program designed for a "racially mixed junior college Guided Studies remedial program" (p. 2). According to Lee: "The function of remedial instruction is to enable the student to modify his careful speech if he wants to, both in what he says and how he says it" (p. 2). Preston (1971) describes a program at Ohio State University which, unlike Lee's, does not assume that the nonstandard speaker needs remedial "help." The course, Dialect Expansion, is based upon four imperatives: 1) The course must be freely chosen by the student; 2) The course must carry full credit; 3) All students, regardless of linguistic background, may register for the course; and 4) The course must be repeatable for full credit.

Communication scholars disagree on the advisability of providing courses such as those discussed above. For example, Colquit (1977) maintains that: "Few schools recognize the legitimacy of the student's right to his own language" (p. 17). He discusses three instructional models which he feels "deny the legitimacy of minority dialects": 1) the melting pot model "implies that Blacks and other minorities have nothing to contribute to the nation, and that they must give up their identity to be assimilated"

(pp. 17-18); 2) the language deficit model "equates cultural difference with inferiority, and its advocates work for the elimination of Black dialect" (p. 18); and 3) the programmed invisibility of minorities by exclusion and cultural oppression (p. 18). Colquit advocates the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) Multi-Ethnic Model. According to Colquit, "the underlying assumption /of this model/ is that all ethnic groups can be enriched by an understanding of each other's language and background. This model recognizes the uniqueness of individuals and divergent groups as a human right and a basic need of all ethnic groups; it rejects the language deficit model and recognizes Black dialect as a different means of communication" (p. 19).

Sayer (1979) argues that Colquit "confuses culture with language" (p. 35) and that language instruction models are not designed to strip minorities of their identity. According to Sayer, "contemporary language instruction is designed to improve the student's social and professional acceptability and adaptability" (p. 46).

Kochman (1974) refutes this argument. He argues that:

> So long as the scholastics can uncontestedly maintain that their educational policies are really intended to "protect" the non-standards of society against discrimination, they will be able to divert attention away from the fact that their policies are really designed to preserve their own interests and those of the present establishment. (p. 40)

Thus, he does not advocate teaching oral performance in standard English to speakers of non-standard dialects because "replacing socially sigmatized forms with socially preferred ones . . . doesn't develop the individual's ability to use language" (1969, p. 87) and "because the 'social security' that the scholastics presume a minority person will have gained from this acquisition is . . . non-existent" (1974, p. 44).

In an article on valuing diversity in language, Goodman (1969) sums up this controversy:

> Educators for generations have assumed that getting a pupil to speak more "properly" automatically made him more effective. The language of low-status groups has been characterized as sloppy, incomplete, ineffective, and inadequate.

> The confusion between language difference and language deficiency permeates texts, tests and curricula in wide use today. (p. 125)

For a summary of studies of nonstandard speech indexed in the ERIC system, see Harpole (1975). Harpole cites an "increasing acceptance of an 'adaptive' standard of correctness" (p. 226). One of the dilemmas facing classroom teachers is that while educators are verbalizing acceptance of "adaptive standards," Harpole cites several research studies which "seem to indicate that, although a child may have the ability to learn and may not be hindered in so doing by his dialect, he may not achieve academically because of negative teacher attitudes associated with his nonstandard speech" (pp. 227-228). Educators are told that "to superimpose the teacher's preference in dialect upon an entire class whether they wish to accept it or not probably raises some rather serious ethical questions" (Ecroyd, 1973, p. 15). Yet, Williams (cited in Harpole, 1975; see also Williams et al., 1971) discovered that teachers' evaluations of a speaker's ethnicity and dialect correlated with their expectations of the child's academic performance. Thus, negative teacher attitudes may be influencing the academic performance of these children even if the teacher is not purposefully attempting to influence their dialect.

As an example of this, Conville and Story (1972) surveyed the basic speech course at the University of Massachusetts and concluded that:

> A good deal of what is taught in courses like Rhetoric 110 may simply be the communication conventions, the sociolinguistic rules, folowed by or esteemed by those who teach the courses. However one wishes to paraphrase the generalization, the data indicate that many students are being expected to perform communication behaviors foreign to their backgrounds while many other students' accustomed communication behaviors are being expected of them: at best, an inequitable situation, one fostered by a failure to welcome a <u>variety</u> of communication competencies into the applied communication course. (p. 253)

Suggestions for the Future

According to Harpole (1975): "To break the cycle of the self-fulfilling prophecy operating in the classroom, changes in teacher training programs are recommended to increase teacher awareness of varying attitudes and communication codes operating in different cultures" (p. 228).

Williams (cited in Harpole, 1975) suggests that:

> findings dealing with speech evaluation and the attitudinal correlates of dialect characteristics should be incorporated into teacher training programs. He observes that, in many cases, teachers are operating with different cultural and linguistic codes than their students. (p. 228)

Teacher training is a good idea; it may, however, be inadequate to solve all of these problems. As Harpole notes:

> Although adequate teacher awareness and training may solve many of these dialect problems inherent in the present educational environment, the problems of the society at large will be alleviated only when society becomes more accepting of different cultural groups. (p. 228)

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